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# Participatory media fandom working on the disjuncture of global mediascape: a case study of anime fansubbing

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# Participatory media fandom working on the disjuncture of global mediascape: a case study of anime fansubbing

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## **Bio-note**

*Hye-Kyung Lee is a lecturer at Culture, Media and Creative Industries (CMCI), King's College London. Her research focuses on cultural policy, creative industries, and cultural consumption and marketing. She is keen on investigating consumers' DIY translation and distribution of cultural products from the perspective of active consumption, consumer ethics, copyright and cultural globalization.*

## **Abstract**

*Recent years have seen the rise of consumers' voluntary translation and distribution of foreign cultural products on a global scale. Such a practice does not only facilitate the grass-root globalization of culture but also questions the cultural industries' current model of global distribution. This paper explores the nature and implications of fan-translation and distribution of cultural commodities through a case study of English fansubbing of anime (subtitling of Japanese animation in English). Anime fansubbing is situated on the disjuncture of global mediascape, which intensifies with the increasing public access to means to copy and share, the expansion of collective knowledge and the rise of fans' voluntary labour coordinated on a global scale. It exemplifies participatory media fandom whose globalization exceeds that of cultural industries in terms of extent and velocity. The paper argues that fansubbing, pursued as a hobby, can unsettle the global mediascape by allowing multiple mediations of cultural text and presenting a new model of content distribution and its organisation based on consumers' voluntary work.*

## **Introduction**

Accessing and consuming foreign cultural products via 'fan-translation' has become an everyday part of life for many ordinary cultural consumers in different sections of the world from the US to China (Barra, 2009; Hu, 2006; Lee, 2009; Leonard, 2005; Napier, 2007). Enthusiastic fans obtain – buy, record from TV or download – overseas

audiovisual products, translate the original language into their own, provide subtitles and release the subtitled version on the Internet for other fans, without asking permission from the relevant copyright holder. ‘Fansubbed’ or fan-subtitled materials are found on the Internet with just a few clicks and easily shared via file sharing, downloading or streaming. Similarly, ‘scanlators’ scan in Japanese comic books, translate and edit them and finally release a translated version on the Internet free of charge (Lee, 2009). Japanese light novels (novels combined with animation characters) are translated by overseas fans and put on the Internet so other fans can share them. The activity of fan-translation and distribution is not confined to Japanese popular cultural products. Without mentioning US films and TV shows (see Barra, 2009 for Italian fansubbing of US TV drama), a rising number of South Korean, Chinese and Taiwanese films and TV drama series reach overseas viewers in the same way, sometimes immediately after broadcasting or DVD release. These practices differ from simple copying and sharing of music files in the sense that they necessitate cultural consumers assuming active roles as mediators and distributors. At the same time, such products can be distinguished from typical user-generated-content in that they entirely rely on existing, copyright-protected cultural products. Fan-translation and distribution of cultural commodities contributes to the bottom-up spread of culture across geographical and linguistic borders. At the same time, it questions the current operation of global cultural industries by providing a new model of content distribution and its organisation based on consumers’ voluntary work.

This paper aims to examine the nature and implications of fan-translation and distribution of cultural commodities within the context of disjunction in the global mediascape. Appadurai (1990) proposes that cultural globalization is a complicated process due to disjoints between different dimensions of global cultural flow, i.e., ethnoscape, mediascape, technoscape, finanscape and ideoscape. This insight could be drawn further to the mediascape itself, which consists of ‘the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information’ and ‘the images of the world created by these media’ (Appadurai, 1990, p. 9). This paper points out that the global mediascape has increasingly been subjected to tensions generated by consumers’ access to means of reproducing and sharing cultural products, their desire trespassing over temporal, spatial and linguistic boundaries, and finally their own mobilization and coordination of intellectual capacities to mediate and distribute foreign cultural products. Through a case study of English fansubbing of anime (subtitling of Japanese animation in English), this paper provides a snapshot of participatory media fandom, which is operating on and is furthering the disjuncture of the global mediascape. The anime industry – much less globalized than US-based cultural industries but facing significant globalizing forces from bottom up – is an interesting example that illustrates the complexity within cultural globalization. The case study finds that English fansubbing

of anime has evolved from a US-originated media fandom to an international project which not only supplement but also can compete with the anime industry's global distribution business in relation to the width of repertoire, speed of release and visual quality. In this context, it will be argued that globalized media fandom is emerging as a new force of cultural globalization, posing challenges to the operation of global cultural industries.

As there are few academic writings on fan-translation and distribution (cf., Barra, 2009; Denison, 2011; Hatcher, 2005; Hu, 2006; Lee, 2009, 2011; Leonard, 2005), this paper relies on a case study, which provides empirical findings from the analysis of text written by anime fans (fan forum, fans' news sites and websites of selected fansubbing groups) and interviews conducted by the author with nine fansubbers (see table 1), an editor of a well-known anime news website, an anime historian and four industry commentators. In order to obtain a random list of groups who produced English fansubs and were active, the author consulted the release page of Baka-updates (a fansubbing list site) and chose the groups who released fansubs during two weeks in autumn 2009 as sample groups. Then she emailed the groups inviting them to interview. Meanwhile a US/UK fansubber introduced her to two US fansubbers who helped her to contact most fansubbers in her selected groups. The interview questions were structured around the following themes: organization and structure of the groups, dynamics in the fansubbing community and the relationship between fansubbing and the industry. The study primarily focuses on English fansubbing. However, it should be noted that there are many fansubbing groups who translate anime into languages other than English, and they differ from English fansubbers in terms of culture, work practice and preferred technologies.

In the following section, the global distribution of cultural products will be discussed from the perspective of mediated copying and dissemination. The next section will explore the broad context of fansubbing by looking into intensifying tensions within the global mediascape, which will be followed by a case study of anime fansubbing. Then, the paper will conclude that fansubbing, pursued as a hobby, can unsettle the global mediascape by allowing multiple mediations of cultural text and presenting a new model of content distribution and its organisation based on consumers' voluntary work.

Table 1. List of interviewed English fansubbers

Fansubbers (pseudonym)/residency	Role	Genres	When started
Adam (US)	Native Japanese translator of a quality group		2002
Andy (US)	Editor of a quality group	Anime for boys Diverse repertoire	1999

Daniel (US)	Group leader & translator	Classics (dedicated to an old anime series) series)	2005
Gerry (US)	Various	Various	1999
James (US/UK)	Project manager & encoder of an old group	Classics (old anime)	2000
Jim (US)	Translator & timer of a speed group, bilingual (English/Chinese)	Ongoing series	
Kate (US)	Leader of a speed group	Ongoing series	2005
Kay (US)	Translator of a few groups	Ongoing series	
Tony (US)	Leader of one of the oldest groups	Classics	Early 1990s

### **Cultural products, mediation and the limitation of global distribution**

As Benjamin (2008[1936]) insightfully noted, reproduction by mechanical means was a prerequisite to the birth of the cultural industries and, in turn, these industries have facilitated the development of reproducible arts. Such an aspect of the cultural industries seemingly constitutes the inherent paradox of their business and could become a trigger of potential crisis. Copying is essential for mass distribution, however too much copying, exceeding market demand, or uncontrolled copying can pose a fundamental threat to the viability of cultural industries. Thus, copying should be tightly protected and controlled. Until recently, alongside the industries' enforcement of copyrights, the technological limitations of mechanical reproduction itself and the costs involved in the reproduction and distribution process functioned as an effective mechanism to regulate unauthorized copying. The necessarily incurred costs also explain the traditional model of cultural business, which is based on combining the two elements of mediascape: the ownership of 'the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations and film production studios)' and 'the images of the world created by these media' (Appadurai, 1990, p. 9). That is, creators of cultural content need distributors to disseminate their works and the distributors require financial incentives, usually in the form of exclusive rights to reproduce and distribute the works, to make the necessary investment. In this model of business, distributors play the most crucial role in widening public accessibility to the works (Ku, 2002).

For global diffusion, copying and mass-production of cultural products require mediation of distributors. The mediation process is rather complicated, typically involving translation, editing, subtitling or dubbing. Mediation is aimed at lowering the cultural and linguistic particularities of the products and facilitates their cross-border mobility by adding new meanings and interpretations to which local consumers can easily relate. The local consumers' existing information and taste of foreign cultural products play equally important roles in helping the products' reception. Cultural

products that have structural and economic advantages (Thompson, 2000) and have already discounted their specificities through continuous exposure could travel more smoothly. In this vein, it is a well-known fact that US films, backed up by major international distributors, dominate the European audiovisual market despite the EU's initiatives such as its film funding and European quota of 50% imposed on TV. Unlike US audiovisual industries, however, those of Japan tend to rely primarily on their domestic market. The existence of a large number of domestic consumers using a single language – Japan's population is 127.69 million as of 2008 and thus ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in the world – and their purchasing power appear to be an important factor behind the prosperity and sustainability of the inward-oriented industries (Collins, 1994; <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/c02cont.htm>). When it comes to international sales, nonetheless, a variety of strategies have been taken by Japanese producers and local distributors to discount the products' cultural 'odour' and transform it to a 'fragrance' that can be easily accepted and appreciated by foreign consumers (Iwabuchi, 2002). Anime, as an art form, can be viewed as an embodiment of such strategies. A typical anime tends to lack Japanese ethnic and bodily traits and yet, paradoxically, this absence of Japaneseness defines the aesthetic style of anime and reminds overseas viewers of anime's nationality. As seen from *Pokémon*, anime characters and storylines are sometimes devised to obscure the anime's origin and strengthen its global appeal. While keeping its distinctive visual style intact, overseas publishers tend to localize anime through editing, changing characters' names, adopting non-literary translation and dubbing. In doing so, the publishers attempt to increase anime's universal appeal and help it access consumers of broader age ranges (particularly children) and thus maximize their profit.

However, mediated copying and distribution of Japanese products requires considerable degrees of investment of time, skills and financial resources. Skills in the Japanese language are not widely available and thus local publishers' selection of repertoires and use of professional expertise for translation play a key role in the mediation process. Despite anime's growing global recognition in recent years and its popular visual aesthetics, its overseas distribution is yet to be fully globalized (Iwabuchi, 2002; Lee, 2009; Leonard, 2005) though some hot properties have been globally distributed by major film distributors: e.g., the *Final Fantasy* series distributed by Sony Pictures, Hayao Miyazaki's animated films by Buena Vista and *Pokémon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh* films by Warner Brothers. In the case of TV anime, however, only popular series are chosen for distribution overseas by companies whose operation is confined to national, geographic or linguistic territories. As local publishers prefer safe, proven products considering the yet unknown potential of the market and necessary investment in mediation process, niche demands are very likely to be ignored. Even when an anime is licensed and its officially translated version is published, the time gap from

broadcasting the original in Japan can range from a few months to several years. These findings illustrate the ‘un-global’ nature of the global distribution of cultural commodities, which is tightly bound by commercial consideration of local distributors who work within geographical and linguistic territories. Perhaps our conventional understanding of media globalization – the condensation of time and space gaps allows people at various geographical locations to culturally connect to other parts of the worlds by consuming the same media contents – may apply only to a small pool of popular content such as US blockbuster films, which instantly find a demand in many different countries and can be simultaneously supplied on a global scale.

### **Participatory media fandom in the global mediascape**

The existing literature on anime fandom views English speaking fans’ subtitling of anime more or less in the contexts of Japan rising as a new centre of cultural globalization (Iwabuchi, 2002), the Western world’s long tradition of fantasizing and desiring Japanese culture (Napier, 2007) and Japanese products filling a void in the animation market overseas (Leonard, 2005). Seeing the validity of such explanations, this paper pays more attention to the evolving dynamics in the global mediascape. The nature of this landscape is conditioned by various factors. However, there is a tendency in the existing literature to emphasize structural factors such as the uneven global distribution of media ownership, deregulation trends and the negotiation between media globalization and national media policies (Herman and McChesney, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Thompson, 2000; Thussu, 2007). The structural view appears to be producer oriented although it also concerns the impacts of globalized media industries and advanced communications technologies on cultural life local consumers. Meanwhile, there has been a lack of investigation of how newly developing cultural consumption practices give consumers the unprecedented leverage to affect global flow of cultural commodities. As fan-translation and distribution indicate, participatory media fandom operating at a global scale is likely to result in a deepening of the global media flow by enlarging its volume and diversity, increasing its extent and accelerating its velocity. At the same time, it unsettles the mediascape as it can exceed the reach of cultural industries’ global distribution business. Such unevenness in cultural globalization not only reflects the disjoint in the global mediascape today but also adds further complexity to it.

Firstly, the unevenness of cultural globalization is attributed to cultural consumers’ attainment of technological capacities to reproduce and disseminate cultural commodities on a global scale. The rise of public access to PCs, broadband connections and digital technologies implies that distribution costs that used to be borne by cultural industries can be thinly decentralized and internalized by the consumers themselves (Ku, 2002). This phenomenon threatens the industries’ traditional business model,



dismantling their existing alliance of the ownership of copyrighted contents with that of means of distribution. Despite the industries' persistence in the traditional business model and introduction of online-based ones (such as broadcasting and subscription models) (Bustamante, 2004; Fox and Wrenn, 2001), cultural consumption today is noticeably detached from the industries' distribution business. For instance, consumers are buying fewer CDs but perhaps they could be consuming more music than before through file sharing. Consumers' own – unauthorized – online distribution of cultural contents across national borders looks difficult to regulate considering the territorial imposition of copyright protection. Despite the existence of international conventions and treaties, there exists no coherently imposable international copyright policy.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, we can easily observe national differences in public perception of copyright protection and in its implementation (e.g., Mehra, 2002; Pang, 2006). In a word, copyright policy is not as globalized as is consumers' unauthorized sharing of cultural contents. This makes it hard in reality to mobilize international policy efforts to tackle unauthorized copying and sharing with some exception of US music and film industries' initiatives (e.g., BBC, 16/2/2009; Motion Picture Association, 17/3/2006).

Secondly, cultural consumers' desire increasingly trespasses over temporal, spatial and linguistic constraints, and this is intensified by their access to collective knowledge. The production of collective knowledge is driven by non-commercial motivations – though cultural companies are keen to absorb it into their marketing strategies – and is freely shared and augmented (Benkler, 2006; Hartley, 2009). As for cultural products, related collective knowledge ranges from their text (e.g., aesthetics, narrative, history, visuals and characters) to context (e.g., production, distribution, reception, and market and policy environments). It aptly serves as 'cultural references' and lowers cultural barriers to foreign consumers and also helps the consumers build up cultural capitals and articulate their tastes. As such, collective knowledge is playing an extremely critical role in shaping potential market for global cultural industries. Yet, the dilemma is that there exists a huge imbalance between consumers' accessibility to collective knowledge and their legitimate access to cultural products in question. The roles of participatory media fandom such as fansubbing enter here. The fandom's activities not only fill the access gap but also add new layers of free knowledge to the original products, making the products difficult to be distinguished as special knowledge that is not free.

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<sup>1</sup> An exception is the European Union's copyright law. The law's main function is to harmonise copyright and related rights (Directive 2001/29/EC) and enforcement of intellectual property rights across the European Union (Directive 2004/48/EC). The EU has created some unitary rights such as 'community trade mark', 'community design' and 'community patent' that can be protected in its territory but there is no 'community copyright'.

Finally, the globalization of media fandom is also driven by consumers' mobilization and coordination of intellectual capacities to mediate foreign cultural text. Utilising their own resource and skills, members of the fandom are willing to and capable of carrying out mediated copying and distribution. The work involved, such as copying, translating, editing, encoding, distributing and managing, is spread between voluntary participants who are closely connected via online communications. The availability of relevant free software is crucial in their work process. The final product of the fans' labour is distributed via globally connected peer-to-peer file sharing networks. An important issue here is that fans themselves carry out previously commercially organised mediation processes non-commercially. In doing so, they blur the existing distinction between production and consumption and problematize the boundary of cultural business (Green & Jenkins, 2009; Jenkins, 2006). These participatory consumers 'co-create' values in mediated cultural text and share with the industries the control over the text to a certain degree (Banks and Deuze, 2009; Cova and Dalli, 2009; Deuze, 2007). This phenomenon can also be conceptualized within the framework of 'free labour' that sees consumers' voluntary, unpaid labour as essential to the economic logic of the knowledge/information-driven society (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Terranova, 2004). However, what is more interesting about fan-translation and distribution is that it represents a new model of cultural work that cannot be simply imitated by the industries' commercial operation. Driven by fans' love for the chosen medium, the work is unpaid, decentralized and self-organized. It can be done on a 24-hour and 7-day basis, utilising enthusiastic fans who regard it as a hobby, not work, and operate from different time zones. The time and space condensation achieved by fan activities aptly demonstrates the noticeable gap between the globalization of participatory media fandom and that of cultural industries' distribution business.

### **A case study of anime fansubbing**

#### ***Anime fansubbers' motives and practice***

Anime fansubbers embody the general characteristics of fans described by Fiske (1992). They are motivated by strong affection for anime and devotion to sharing it with other fans. In return for their investment of emotion, time and effort, they obtain sense of pleasure, fun and reward (interview with ADAM, DANIEL, GERRY, KAY, TONY). Forming and taking part in the community is also an important motivation. Regardless of difference between fansubbing groups, sharing the same philosophy (e.g., 'philosophy of quality translation and presentation'), sensing a friendship and enjoying working together with group members are identified as important factors in sustaining them and allowing them to prosper (ADAM, ANDY). Fansubbers are involved in productive activities, through which they enhance their knowledge of anime and learn

new skills such as translation and editing skills that are proudly demonstrated in their final products. Their attitude towards fansub viewers is different from one group to another, but there is a tendency to pay attention to viewers' responses – either longstanding followers or more casual users – taking their comments or download numbers seriously. Fansubbing is a 'shadow cultural economy' in Fiske's (1992) sense. It is in parallel with official cultural economy in terms of its requirement for passionate workforce, related cultural capitals and internal logic of the field.

Another important motive of fansubbers is their strong desire to support the local animation industry by promoting anime culture and widening anime's accessibility. When fansubbing started in the beginning of the 1990s as part of US anime fandom, its key aim was to provide English-speaking fans with a wide variety of animes that were not available through authorized distribution. Hence, the unspoken rule within the fan community was that once the anime was licensed the fansubbed version should no longer be circulated. Anime enthusiasts obtained anime titles from Japan, for example in the form of a VHS copy of a TV anime series, translated and subtitled them and then made a number of copies of the fansubbed videos. The copied VHS tapes were shared by post among anime clubs across the country, and some of them were also sent to UK fan communities (interview with Helen McCarthy, 2009). The official version would be far superior to fansubs in terms of visual quality and anime fans were keen collectors and, therefore, there would be no competition between fansubbed and official versions. Around the beginning of the new millennium, fansubbing went digital. Its process was made easier as well as cheaper, and the visual standard of fansubs dramatically improved. More importantly, digital fansubs could be reproduced endlessly without any visual deterioration. Simply speaking, digital technologies allowed fans almost the same degree of reproduction capacities as those of the anime industry. In the early days of 'digisub', fansubs were produced in the form of 'hardsubs' where subtitles were imprinted in the video. However, the dominant form of English fansubs today is 'softsubs': video and subtitles – which are provided in separate files – can be separated or combined, making the option of multiple languages possible. The arrival of *Aegisub* – an open source software – has brought more flexibility to fansubs by allowing users to freely alter text, font, colour and the timing of subtitles. Thanks to these developments, fansubs these days can be easily modified, remade and re-translated.

The process of fansubbing generally starts with obtaining original videos (or 'raws') from DVD, Japanese P2P sites and English raw sites. Some groups have their own raw providers in Japan who record TV anime shows for the group. The next step is translation and timing, which are followed by editing and typesetting. Then the subtitles are merged with the raw (i.e., encoding). After a quality check of the fansub by viewing it a few times, the group 'releases' it. These tasks are divided between group members; often, a member does multiple tasks. The time spent producing a fansub of an episode

of TV anime (about 25 minutes) depends on the skills of those involved. Typically, it would be 8-20 hours but those who aim to bring out fansubs of current shows more rapidly spend about 5-7 hours per episode (KATE). The groups self-fund – sometimes depending on viewers' voluntary donation – server maintenance: e.g., this costs Group A US\$79 per month. The amount would increase sharply if the group directly recorded TV animes from Japan equipping its member there with recording facilities and subscription to cable channels.

### ***Globalization of anime fansubbing***

There are numerous fansubbing groups and it is difficult to know how many exist. As of October 2009, the Baka-updates website provided details for approximately 740 groups, mainly English fansubbers. Another popular listing site, MyAmineList, showed a list of more than 2,000 groups, including non-English speakers. Until the early noughties, English fansubbing was an activity pertinent to anime fandom in the US. Members of the fandom had a strong sense of closeness and geographical proximity. Such a culture is still found in old groups whose members went to university together or regularly meet offline as well (JAMES, TONY).

English fansubbing has rapidly been globalized over the years in terms of the fandom's viewership and membership. This can be seen as a by-product of the globalization of anime and anime culture facilitated by the growing availability of local editions and further driven by the expansion of collective knowledge of anime. As many fansubbers comment, however, it was the rise of *BitTorrent*, a peer-to-peer file sharing protocol that 'put fansubbing on the map internationally' by allowing faster and more convenient distribution of fansub files (ANDY, TONY). A fansub release began being shared with hundreds of thousands of people per week and the number of downloaders would escalate into the millions once it reached well-known file sharing portals such as The Pirate Bay (ANDY). At the same time, the English fansubbing scene has seen a huge influx of non-native fansubbers. In spite of the existence of non-English fansubbing groups (e.g., those working in French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, etc.), English fansubbing appears to have a heavy gravity as a well recognised fandom where anyone who could make a contribution could join. Many active groups are still based in the US but today's English fansubbing is an international project involving fans in Europe, Asia, South America and other continents.

Equally noticeable is that fansubbing has become much easier due to the availability of open source software such as *Matroška* (multimedia container), *Combined Community Codec Pack [CCCP]* (pack of video compression filters) and *Aegisub* (subtitling programme). This free software 'made it possible for any aspiring anime fan to start his/her own fansub group' (ADAM). At the same time, there has been a rise of 'speed groups' that work within a several-hour turnaround time to bring

English-speaking fans the latest episodes of anime as soon as they are aired in Japan. Quite often multiple groups work on the same popular show, leading to multiple versions of it. Such a tendency corresponds with the influx of young fans to the existing pool of fansubbers and the introduction of a new culture of freelancing, project-based working and working for multiple groups (DANIEL).

### ***Relationship between fansubbing and the anime industry***

Anime fansubbing has had a dialectical relationship with the anime industry. Traditionally US anime publishers found fansubbing useful for testing demand and broadening the fan base (Hatcher, 2005; Leonard, 2005). Meanwhile, anime producers in Japan tended to be lukewarm in their reaction towards fansubbing, seeing it as something taking place in a remote market which was much smaller than the domestic one (my interviews with an animator and an industry commentator in Japan). Even there exist anecdotes about some Japanese anime producers positively acknowledging fansubbers' labour of love that helped to bring their work to overseas fans. For example, the director of *Battle Programmer Shirase* is reported to have acknowledged fansubbing when he aired his apologies for having to finish the series at the end of the last episode of the series in 2004: '[Apologies to] those who enjoy the show on TV...and to everyone who watched it subtitled overseas without permission' ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_Programmer\\_Shirase](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_Programmer_Shirase)). Such tolerance from the industry corresponded with fansubbers' consensus that fansubbing was a promotion that ideally should lead to support for the industry by motivating fans to buy official VHS or DVD. The consensus is reflected in the rule 'drop the project when licensed in the US (or North America)', which has been a long-running tradition for many old and respected fansubbing groups (ADAM). Old groups or groups led by longstanding fans tend to focus on classic (old) anime and unknown titles, thus their projects are not likely to breach the rule in most cases: '[a group's name] exists solely for old classics nobody really cares about' (JAMES); 'my group only subtitles very obscure shows' (a fansubber cited in Bertschy, 2008a). Some of them look down on those who do not follow this rule (KATE).

However, the rule is becoming less applicable as it faces the increasing immediacy of fans' demands, the temporal and spatial disparity in overseas licensing, the use of English fansubs as a preferred medium by non-English speaking fans and the increasingly globalized membership of English fansubbing communities. For example, speed subbers who work on popular, ongoing series such as *Naruto Shippuden* – which are already licensed – insist that fans should have access to the latest episodes as soon as they are aired in Japan. Many of them have a tendency to stop when the US licensee

or, in rare cases, the Japanese studio asks them to quit the project.<sup>2</sup> When a group drops a popular project for the above reason, however, other (sometimes splinter) groups who want to continue the project quickly emerge. In addition, there are groups who find the old rule parochial given the globalized nature of English fansubbing production and consumption:

The world is bigger than what R1 [region 1] licenses cover, and [the group's name] is an international group (in fact, about half [*sic*] of the group is European, another half [*sic*] is Asian, the third half [*sic*] is unsure and the final half [*sic*] refuses to say). Sorry, but we won't abandon the rest of the world simply because someone bought the R1 license. (A well-recognized speed subbing group's website)

The change in the attitude of fansubs' viewers can be also noted. Digital fansubbing has lowered the entry barrier to anime fandom: these days even the least dedicated viewers can easily access the latest anime, fansubbed in English or another language, with a few clicks. Many of the more recent fans do not seem to be as motivated as old fans in purchasing and collecting DVDs. Furthermore, for those who have formed their appetite through freely available fansubbed anime, anime might be regarded as a part of the free knowledge of the fandom.

Consequently, the anime industry's view of fansubbing has changed in recent years. Facing the decline of DVD sales, the US anime companies have begun blaming fansubs for replacing licensed products. This is exemplified by the open letter by Arthur Smith of GDH International (an international arm of GDH K.K., the owner of Gonzo Studio in Japan), which acknowledged fansubbing's contribution but strongly urged it to stop immediately (Smith, 2007). Such an idea is widely held by anime licensees in the US and, to a certain degree, by Japanese producers who have become more conscious of file sharing of anime in Japan and overseas. Some fansubbers, particularly old ones, have been actively engaged in discussion with the industry on an alternative

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<sup>2</sup> In 2004, Media Factory (a Japanese studio) directly sent a Cease & Desist letter to Animesuki.com, a well-established anime *BitTorrent* and forum site, asking it to stop distributing torrents of its products. Animesuki immediately removed torrents of all affected anime and decided not to list any other titles from the same company (<http://www.animesuki.com/doc.php/legal/mediafactory.html>, accessed on 6 April 2010). Media Factory is reported to have sent C&D letters to fansub groups LunarAnime and WannbeFansubs asking them to drop its anime series. Another example might be that Kuro-Hana Fansubs immediately quit fansubbing and distributing *Death Note* when it got a letter from Viz Media, the US licensee of Media Factory, in 2007.

business model of the global anime business.<sup>3</sup> However, the industry and fansubbers' viewpoints are divergent. On one hand the industry is framing fansubbing as *piracy*. On the other hand, fansubbers discuss it within the framework of *global distribution of anime*, urging the industry both in Japan and the US to make efforts to satisfy consumer's desires that no longer can be temporally, geographically and linguistically tied up. Fansubbers propose globally simultaneous streaming of anime as the ultimate alternative. Their consensus is that the industry's current business model, which is still territory-based, is no longer competitive. This point is recognized by the Japanese anime industry as Yasuo Yamaguchi, executive director of the Association of Japanese Animations, notes: 'The global fan base for Japanese "anime" is increasing, but with the old business model crumbling it isn't translating into profits' (*The Japan Times*, 2009).

It is argued that although digital fansubs began circulating a number of years ago the industry did nothing to stop them or provide substitutes for them until very recently. While the industry failed to consider the potential of online distribution, fansubbers were on the frontline of innovation, vigorously adopting new technologies to bring anime to a wider audience. At the same time, fansubbing has clearly demonstrated a new model of anime distribution, which is inseparable from social production of collective knowledge of anime. Although this model's legitimacy is questioned due to its copyright infringing nature, it has been effective in cultivating anime culture. It has not only diversified the scope of anime available to fans with its offer of unknown, old and non-mainstream anime – thus exemplifying the 'long tail' strategy (Anderson, 2004) – but also has facilitated the production and sharing of the collective knowledge of anime. In-depth information on anime has been compiled by anime fansubbing listing sites and extensive catalogues of fansubbed anime are available on fansubbing distribution sites, serving as a public library of anime. Through fansubbing, anime has gained unprecedented global accessibility. This vividly indicates the increasing decoupling of public access to cultural contents from cultural industries' offers, a fundamental paradox in the global mediascape today.

### ***The industry's unconvincing responses***

Facing the popularity of fansubbed anime, the animation industry is slowly moving towards online streaming services. However, the function of streaming services looks slightly different inside and outside Japan. Japanese anime producers have traditionally relied on sales of DVDs and merchandising items – which are targeted at devoted fans – and thus have used TV broadcasting as advertising. Over the years, studios began to experiment with Internet streaming services, but this is perceived as another way of

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/convention/2008/fansubs-and-industry-panel>,  
<http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/video/4077/> (accessed on 5 February 2010).

advertising rather than a revenue-generating business model (my interviews with an animator and an industry commentator in Japan). For example, Shaft, the Japanese animation studio, released episode 13 of *Bakemonogatari* (化物語) on its official website (<http://www.bakemonogatari.com/>) on 3 November 2009 without TV broadcasting and without any regional restrictions. It was followed by the online premieres of episodes 14 and 15, which were limited to Japan. *Bakemonogatari* was hugely popular among overseas fans and a number of English fansubbing groups were working on the series. Shaft's move was hailed by overseas fans as an example of innovation the rest of the industry should follow. However, its intention was to boost domestic DVD/Bluray sales rather than to cater for overseas viewers. Lawful online streaming of anime has begun in countries such as the US, France and South Korea, but global distribution of anime via online does not yet seem high on agenda of the Japanese anime industry. The streaming services resemble fansubbing in that they rely on subtitles rather than dubbing and quickly deliver ongoing popular series to overseas audience. However, their distribution deals are still territorially based and various access gaps remain.

In the US, lawful streaming services of anime via video streaming sites and existing TV channels' Internet services run on broadcasting or subscription models: e.g., YouTube, Hulu, Joost, NBC.com, Cartoon Network Video, Funimation Videos and Crunchyroll. For instance, Hulu, one of the largest Internet TV sites in the US, adds 'subtitled, uncut episodes of *Naruto Shippuden*, one episode per week on a seven-day delay from their original Japanese airdates'.<sup>4</sup> The show is free but advertisements are added. The same series is streamed by Crunchyroll, an Internet TV dedicated to anime and Asian TV drama: all new episodes of *Naruto Shippuden* are released every Thursday morning, 3:30am Pacific Time (their air time in Japan is 7.30pm on Wednesdays).<sup>5</sup> Subscribers can watch high definition versions of the shows once released but non-subscribers have to wait a week – which can be perceived as a long time by many fans – to watch them free of charge. The English fansubbers' reaction towards such a development is generally positive and some of them predict that it would eventually lessen the need for fansubs. However, there is an overall feeling that authorized shows are still far behind fansubbing in many ways and, thus, they are not very likely to make immediate, significant impacts on it.

First, many of the lawful streaming services are geographically limited, thus cannot compete with the globalized fansubbing. Equally, their current offer is far from satisfying the niche appetites of fan communities. Second, the streaming services are behind fansubbing in terms of speed. Third, as a fansubber notices, 'As good intended

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hulu.com/naruto-shippuden?c=Animation-and-Cartoons> (accessed on 6 April 2010).

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.crunchyroll.com/library/Naruto\\_Shippuden](http://www.crunchyroll.com/library/Naruto_Shippuden) (accessed on 6 April 2010).



as it is though, the video quality is sub par and does not match up to what good fansubbers can do with it' (TONY). As many fansubbers produce high-definition and Bluray DVD fansubs, the sub-par quality of legal streaming services can be effortlessly spotted. The streaming service, which is maintained from a central server, cannot compete with peer-to-peer file sharing in terms of technical capacities that determine the visual quality of the anime. Fourth, the streaming has unintentionally made fansubbing easier: some fansubbers rip – transcribe – subtitles from it and combine them with a better video source and release the subtitled video as 'ripped'. The ripper groups' main target has been Crunchyroll, and this seems to reflect fansubbers' discomfort with its 'shady' past, that is, the website distributed fansub materials for profit before it began to provide authorized contents (Bertschy, 2008b). The ripper groups, who are usually based outside the US, pose a direct challenge to authorized streaming providers operating within the US or North American territories. Finally, as a fansubber comments, it should be understood that fansubbing as a hobby cannot be simply replaced by streaming services.

[Fansubbing is] a form of expression and a way to show off your skills or whatever [and is also a] rather expressive subculture.... There are however fans of fansubbing who follow specific groups. These fans of it are into the "scene" and like how fansubs are created. So in that respect the industry will more than likely never substitute fansubs. (GERRY)

## Conclusion

Fan-translation and distribution, as a participatory media fandom, exist on the growing contrast and disjoint between different forces in the global mediascape: the incongruence between the ownership of copyrights of cultural products and that of technical means to copy and share; the blurred distinction between copyrighted contents and free knowledge; and gaps between the territorially bounded distribution of foreign cultural products and the transnationality and immediacy of consumer desire. The case study of anime fansubbing sheds a light on the fandom's evolving dynamics. English fansubbing of anime was triggered by the gaps in the overseas distribution of anime and, consequently, the unmet demand of US fans. Initially, it functioned within the industry structure instead of giving birth to alternatives to the authorized products. The consensus of 'drop the project if licensed in the US (or North America)' reflected fandom's attempt to limit its effect to that of supplementing the local anime industry's offer. In addition, fansubbing's geographical and technological constraints kept its role as a connector for missing links between the industry and viewers. However, with the arrival of digital fansubbing and the fandom's globalization, fansubbing has emerged as a new, popular model of global distribution of anime. The mediation of anime text by fans is likely to lead to a surge of multiple, sometimes competing mediations of global

flow of anime – by the industry as well as its consumers. Even within fansubbing itself, competing mediations are not uncommon: today we can observe multiple speed subbing groups working on the same projects, resulting in different versions of fansubs of an anime. The existence of plural mediations, within and outside the market-based system, intensifies the tension in the global mediascape by spreading multiple goals, legitimacies and operational practices of transnational flow of cultural contents.

As fansubbing is an ongoing phenomenon, it is difficult to fully comprehend its influence on cultural industries and how the industries will react. The case study shows the ambivalent effect of fansubbing: it complements the anime industry by creating new global demand and thus expanding the potential market for anime; and yet, it can also compete with the industry by detaching anime consumption from market transactions and facilitating alternative routes of global anime flow. This also relates to the coexistence of potentially conflicting motives within the fandom itself: the pursuit of gratification and the intention to support the local anime industry. As the fandom becomes globalized and new practices – such as speed subbing – emerge, the coexistence is becoming difficult to maintain. Fansubbers are vocal about how much they care about the industry and many of them are keen commentators on the industry's failing business model and potential alternatives. There also exist those who worry about fansubbing's substituting effects and assert the need for conforming to old ethics of 'drop when licensed'. However, the concerns with the industry appear to come second to their personal attachment to fansubbing as a hobby, where they can immerse themselves and find fun, pleasure and friendship. This is succinctly pointed out by a seasoned fansubber when he referred to fansubbers who do not follow the 'drop when licensed' rule for various reasons: 'it's a matter of...well, old habits die hard, it's a fun hobby. If you told a person tomorrow that they had to stop playing Warcraft, or stop smoking cigarette, they are not going to stop tomorrow' (Bertschy, 2008a). Such motivation and desire, which is essential to media fandom, cannot be easily managed or regulated by the industry.

The anime industry exemplifies cultural industries that are facing pressure from their own consumers who, networked and coordinated on a global scale, can self-organize mediation and distribution of cultural commodities, based on the non-commercial principle. Under such pressure, the anime industry has begun framing fansubbing as piracy. Nevertheless, the industry does not regard taking legal action as a good solution because this could alienate the fansubbing community that have constituted the core of anime fandom. The industry's current strategy appears to be exploring a new medium – such as the Internet – for global distribution of anime, but it does not look effective at reducing the demand for fansubbing. Like DVD distribution, authorized streaming is territorially and technologically bounded and thus still cannot subdue the immediate mediation and borderless mobility of fansubs. In this sense, we

can perhaps view a significant part of the overseas anime market as a so-called missing market: in spite of overseas fans' growing demands for anime, a market hardly exists due to constraints such as high costs for global distribution, limited technologies (thus limited visual quality as seen from authorized online streaming) and anime's increasing assimilation to and inclusion in the free knowledge of global anime fandom. Anime's globally dispersed missing market has been and might be explored only by the free labour of dedicated fans who have strong missions and motivations and keenness for technological innovation, voluntarily donate their time and skills, and can work virtually 24 hours per day collaborating with colleagues in different continents. Such a type of operation looks hard to copy and be adopted by an industry that works strictly within the commercial paradigm. It is yet to be observed whether or how the industry can come up with commercially viable models of global anime distribution that can successfully make markets out of overseas fans' desire for anime consumption.

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